ASK

Stories as Agents for Change
by Dr. Alexander Laufer

Stories are Just for Children

In 1971, when I started my career as an engineer, I would have laughed if somebody had told me that I would compose three professional books, and lead a professional magazine for NASA – all focusing on stories.

As a young engineer my primary tools were mathematical models for designing structures. When I pursued my master's degree I shifted to operations research models. Following my Ph.D., I went back to industry and developed and implemented comprehensive computerized tools aimed at controlling project time and cost. When I decided to join academia, in 1983, I added to my professional arsenal statistical tools.

My research results throughout the 80s gradually brought me to change my research methodology. I abandoned impersonal tools and focused on firsthand data, primarily direct observations of behavior, case studies, and personal interviews. As a researcher working closely with practitioners during those years, I learned to reverse the question I used to ask when I first joined academia: "Why don't practitioners use what researchers know?" I began to ask, "Why don't researchers use what practitioners know?" Moreover, I learned firsthand that competent practitioners usually know more than they can tell.

My main research efforts, therefore, were devoted to identifying the most competent practitioners; uncovering, formulating, and articulating their "tacit" knowledge. I did this by proposing a theoretical interpretation of actual project practices. This interpretation was then presented to my co-researchers -- the competent managers -- for their judgment, to see how well it fit with their personal experience. However, throughout these years it never even occurred to me to use stories for generating or disseminating knowledge. I believed that stories were only for children and I had a good personal reason for this.

While my wife took most of the burden of upbringing our four children, bedtime stories were left for me. Between 1980 and 1995, for almost every night, I told my children a bedtime story, and since it turned out that they preferred my own fictional stories, I became eventually quite good at composing children's stories. My children and I were eagerly waiting for the bedtime ritual, which always brought a new story and a new surprise for them and for me. These fictional stories became our small-cherished secret. However, when each of my children reached the age of 10, the ritual stopped. They preferred their own books to Daddy's stories. This sharp shift in their interest only enhanced my confidence that stories are just for children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Stories as Agents for Change (cont'd.)

Using Stories to Change   Your Eyeglasses

In 1991, when I felt I was ready to test my research results I took it upon myself to find a suitable, real-life "laboratory." Believing that consultation is the only feasible way to test research results and to collect rich and unfiltered feedback firsthand, I began looking for an appropriate organization. Procter & Gamble (P&G) met all my demands: a very progressive organization, which had to cope with high uncertainty and accelerated speed in its project delivery, and was known to hire high quality people.

My charter was quite broad -- to use my research products in order to improve project management at P&G. My sponsor, Gordon Denker, who encouraged me to "consult by wandering around", was the key to my ability to function both as a consultant and a researcher. Though he set down some general guidelines, I was basically given a free hand in proposing my assignments. This was a dream come true, but it demanded great effort -- I had to market myself throughout the organization, generate my own customers, and satisfy their immediate business needs. P&G was expecting that my "action research" role would in no way affect my commitment and service to them as a consultant.

I initiated a wide range of activities: training, review of procedures, development of tools, and many "learning-from-experience" discussions conducted in small groups. My main effort, however, focused on working directly with project teams of ongoing projects.

The feedback was excellent, yet I was not fully satisfied. First, the pace of implementation did not seem fast enough. Second, the project management approach I was introducing called for *adding on* some new project management principles and tools, as well as *letting go* of some old ones. The *letting go* was not embraced so easily, particularly by the less experienced project managers.

During my third visit to Cincinnati, I realized that the conventional mode of consulting was insufficient for the quick,wide, and lasting assimilation that was essential for valid research implementation feedback.

My answer to this problem was storytelling. Why? Because I realized that my role was similar to that of an optometrist -- trying to convince people that in order to change the way they viewed the world, they would have to change their eyeglasses. I also realized that people's minds are changed more through observation than through argument. I therefore thought that the telling of real-life stories by credible and successful managers, colleagues from their own company, would serve as an efficient substitute for observation.

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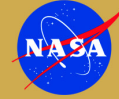
The idea that successful and busy project managers should set aside the time to tell and write stories was not adopted easily. First I had to overcome the prevailing feeling that stories are meant for children and not for managers. Even including the word story, in the title of a booklet we produced as a pilot, was deemed inappropriate. Then I had to overcome the disbelief of the managers in their own writing ability, and to convince them that the effort was worthwhile. But once we started, there was no way back. Almost everyone who saw the booklet became enthusiastic immediately and wanted to contribute his/her own success story.

The results of my effort at P&G exceeded my wildest expectations. At the conclusion of a workshop where project managers presented and discussed their stories, Gordon Denker commented: "I would never have believed that such a profound change in language, focus of attention, and way of thinking could have taken place within a two-year period."

The final product, the book of stories, was composed of 70 stories written by 28 project managers, and it is still in use at P&G. Since I launched my first storybook project in 1991, I have learned that stories have many other unique attributes that render them so powerful in capturing and disseminating knowledge. More on these unique attributes in the next issues of ASK.

PS: By the way, what should I make of the fact that my grown up children still read fictional stories? It seems that stories are good for all ages, but my fictional stories just for children.

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